Biologists Reflect on Oil Spill Five Years Later

By Denise Rowell

Retired sea turtle biologist Lorna Patrick carefully removes sea turtle eggs from a stretch of beach impacted by the oil spill in 2010. The eggs were taken to the east coast so they would be out of harm's way.
Credit: FWS

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded forty-one miles off the coast of Louisiana. Eleven people lost their lives in the explosion, and life along the coast would change dramatically. As oil from the damaged well began flowing into the gulf, biologists were on high alert. The Gulf coast region is a globally unique ecosystem, supporting a high number of beach-nesting birds, such as sandwich terns, brown pelicans, and Wilson's plovers. At the time of the spill, these species were on the brink of nesting season, and oil would be detrimental to the birds. Nesting sea turtles were also in grave danger. The embattled species was at risk of losing an entire nesting season.

While oil was still far from land, Panama City contaminants biologist Jon Hemming was already in response mode. He was in contact with another contaminants biologist, Pete Tuttle, who was stationed in Daphne, Alabama. Together, the two acted as first responders to the region. "We immediately began to coordinate, discussing the needs in Alabama and the Florida panhandle," said Hemming.

Biologists only had days to figure out how to protect the wildlife, and minimize the exposure of oil. This meant quickly organizing teams, deploying boats and helicopters, and forming strategies on how to protect sensitive lands. "Every day, we had to watch the projections, and match those with the proper ground response. This took coordination from the Department of Interior, Region 4 of the Service, refuges, and field offices," explained Hemming. "From former Secretary Salazar to biologists in the Atlanta Regional Office, and project leaders in the field, we all had to work together."

Don Imm was the Panama City Field Office Project Leader at that time. He quickly realized this disaster was happening in his own back yard. Imm knew this incident would occupy most of his staff. "From recovery operations, to the administrative aspect, GIS, and the Natural Resources Damage Assessment and Recovery process, my staff was dedicated to assisting with the spill," explained Imm.

Imm also joined staff members as a part of the wildlife operations recovery team. Gayle Martin, Sandy Pursifull, Cameron Morris, Paul Lang, Jon Hemming, Matt Laschet, and Laura Jenkins all spent endless hours in the heat, looking for oiled wildlife. When calls came into the wildlife hotline, these folks were on stand-by, ready to take action. Jenkins, who is now retired, said it gave local folks a sense of comfort, knowing Service biologists were scouring the beaches. "The people we talked to were grateful and happy," explained Jenkins. "They were especially relieved that we were also working on the weekends."

Not that the work was easy. Biologists walked miles of beach, working twelve-to-seventeen hour days. "There were hot days, some over 100 degrees. We drank water throughout the day to stay hydrated," said Jenkins.

Besides saving wildlife, one of the most rewarding things was meeting people from all over the country, who came to northwest Florida to lend a hand. "From Alaska, to Washington….even North Dakota, it was neat meeting the dedicated workers. Service firefighters also committed their time to the oil spill," said Jenkins.

Florida sea turtle nests were also at high risk of being contaminated by oil. In a massive effort, the Service joined forces with the National Marine Fisheries Service, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Federal Express, Kennedy Space Center, military bases, National and Florida Parks, Ecological Associates, Inc. and the volunteer Turtle Watch groups to help move the sea turtle eggs out of harm's way. Under the direction of National Sea Turtle Coordinator Sandy Macpherson, wildlife biologist Lorna Patrick led the way for the Panama City Field Office. "While it was a risky decision to move the eggs, we knew it could have resulted in certain death for the turtles if we did not," said Patrick.

Teams of biologists also kicked off the Natural Resources Damage and Assessment (NRDA) process and had the tough task of measuring the oil's damage to wildlife. Those on the NRDA bird survey group included Mary Mittiga, Patty Kelly, Melody Ray-Culp, Harold Mitchel, and Richard Zane. Biologists Bill Tate, Channing St. Aubin, and Jeff Van Vrancken also spent many hours on oil spill work at Eglin Air Force Base.

"The worst thing during the spill response was that period when the oil was still gushing out, being out there every day witnessing the disaster, and not knowing what the future held for the Gulf coast. It was a threat to both our livelihood, the natural resources that we're entrusted with protecting and our home," said biologist Mary Mittiga.

In the end, Panama City biologists had reason to be thankful. The pristine beaches received minimal oiling. But Panama City biologists aren't quite ready to let their guards down. "Even though the Florida coast was not as heavily oiled, we still do not fully understand the full effects of the damage to the Gulf, said current Project Leader Catherine Phillips. "Our work will not stop until we see a full recovery from the oil spill of 2010."